DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 327 EF 005 709

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TITLE Alternative Use of K-12 School Buildings: Opportunities for Expanded Uses.
INSTITUTION Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2000-01-00
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Public Schools; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Facility Management; *Facility Use

ABSTRACT

This report examines the underutilization of K-12 school facilities and the hidden advantages and disadvantages in expanding K-12 school facilities beyond a 7-hour weekday. It concludes that the benefits from extending facility hours for more teaching, increased extracurricular activities, and community use appear to far outweigh the more traditional limitations on the use of school facilities. A list of ways school facilities can be used by the surrounding community is provided, followed by resources for information on schools that have already expanded the traditional use of their facilities. (GR)

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ED 441 327

Alternative Use of K-12 School Buildings: Opportunities for Expanded Uses

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U.S. Department of Education
January 2000

Existing school facilities in most cases offer significant opportunities to satisfy not only the learning needs of all learners, but many of the social and recreational needs for the community. School buildings, their contents and grounds, often represent the largest single asset of most communities. Unfortunately, most communities in this country continue to use these resources at a rate that is about equal to 30 percent of the available daylight hours.[1]

While it is true there are major shifts occurring in student demographics, curriculums, and testing standards, the fact remains that school buildings in this country by and large are substantially under-utilized. The degree of this under-utilization tends to be lower in rural areas where small towns have historically used their facilities for a wide variety of community services.

Pressures are building, however, to expand the use of local school facilities during and outside of the traditional school day. Only part of this pressure can be explained by the growing demand for improved educational test scores. Increased demand for community services and the high costs for housing and maintaining the facilities for these services have forced communities to consider additional uses for this investment.

Evaluation of the current after-hours use of school building practices of northern European countries as well as Canada has shown that K-12 school facilities can improve the well being of the community.

There are five basic categories of after-hour school activities. They are:

Cultural and social (i.e. community theaters)
Youth activities, including day care (i.e. athletic associations)
Resource use and information dissemination (i.e. community libraries)
Health, leisure, and recreation (i.e. swimming and fitness clubs)
Adult learning (i.e. remedial, retraining, informal, and advanced studies)

From the outset, one should recognize the common limitations that must be overcome when school facilities are used for activities other than the primary mission of educating students. In general they are:

Basic layout and usefulness of the facility
Liability costs
Maintenance and operation costs

[1] Based on the estimated average school day length school calendar and school year

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Capital cost of new facilities
Resistance from the educational community

There are a number of "hidden" advantages and some disadvantages in expanding the use of K-12 school facilities beyond a 7-hour weekday. Unfortunately to a large extent the community, including the educational community as a whole, overlooks the number of very positive benefits that become available when schools are opened to serve the broader needs of the community. For example:

- School districts find it easier to get funding for a new facility when taxpayers see community benefits. Simply put, "more bang for the buck."
- Reduced vandalism
- Local businesses and organizations are more receptive to contributing dollars, equipment and resources to those schools that include community use.
- Broad-based community support of schools is greater because more people know what is going on in the schools.
- Improvements in the physical plant that benefit both the school and community activities.
- Potential opportunity exist for developing additional revenue streams and/or improvements to the school's environment

Aside from the obvious increased sense of "community ownership," school facilities with a mix of non-traditional classroom spaces broaden the traditional education process by providing access during the normal school hours to enrich the learning environment. It should be noted that a sense of community may be a particularly important element in enhancing the educational and social development of students at risk of academic failure.[2]

The mere fact that after normal school hour activities are taking place within the building or on the school grounds tends to reduce willful destruction and/or disfigurement of property, increase community awareness, and more fully integrate the school into the life of the community. Savings also accrue to the entire community by reducing the requirements for additional infrastructure and infrastructure support. These latter cost savings may be substantial if a number of separate specialized structures were otherwise necessary to satisfy the needs of the community. Improving and strengthening the existing school building to accommodate these additional activities by additions or renovations will still usually yield savings by co-mingling elements of the physical plant.

Finally, a facility capable of being used by a broad spectrum of the community will establish strong partnerships with groups and/or organizations that are generally separate from the education community.

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[2] *Eric Digest*, Number 111, March 1997, EDO-EA-97-3, ERIC Clearinghouse of Educational Management, University of Oregon.

There are some overt as well as hidden costs when traditional school facilities are expanded to incorporate other activities. Instances where school facility scheduling and use is determined without the direct input of the school principal can be counter productive to the principal educational activities of the school. Security of school and community materials during occupancy must be provided. Normal wear and tear of specialized structures such as performing art centers, greenhouses and swimming pools are usually not recoverable through fees or dues. The physical limitation due to age or design may require over restrictive requirements to the proposed activity. Additional custodial, security, and supply costs may not be covered. Building codes may have to be strengthened. Liability issues are more complex and require detailed examination. Improvements in storage capacity and parking, HVAC, utilities, restrooms, and lighting are some of the obvious components that must be redesigned and improved for additional activities.

Unfortunately, not all schools have the capability of making unlimited community accommodations because of limitations of the physical plant, location, or other restrictions. One critical element that is too often overlooked in expanding community use of the school facility is the negative impact that may be incurred by the immediate area surrounding the school. Increased traffic, parking, and noise that are the result of increased school facility use are problems that require consideration and continued monitoring. Care should be taken to ensure that these difficulties are not overlooked.

Conclusion: There is a clear trend toward expanding the utilization of K-12 school facilities through year-round schooling, extended school teaching periods, and increased extracurricular activities as well as an increased recognition of the value to society of a lifetime of learning. The benefits of this trend to the school, the community and the education community appear to substantially outweigh the more traditional limitations on the use of school facilities. The U. S. Department of Education in a recent publication stated, "Today's educational facilities should be designed to sustain the integral relationship between a school and its community. They should be places where creative configurations of space expand their use to encompass early learning and adult education, where learning occurs "after hours," late at night and on weekends, where school-to-school partnerships, links with businesses and collaboration with higher education are encouraged and supported. They should enable learners of all ages and serve as centers for lifelong learning."[3]

Ultimate success is closely related to proper planning and open communication with all elements of the community. (See endnotes)

Examples of Community Use(s):

Community Center
Health Clinic

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[3] Draft document based upon six design principles presented at the **National Symposium on School Design** sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education in October 1998. Full text is available at The National Clearinghouse for Education Facilities web site: http://www.edfacilities.org/ir/edprinciples.html

Park and Recreation
Swimming Center
Theater and Arts Center
Senior Citizens Center
Police Center
Young Child Day Care Center
Garden Center
Car Repair Center
Social Services
Leisure/Cultural Activities
Spiritual Center
Public Library Branch
Job Development Center
Food Bank and Needy Hot Meal Center
Adult Education Center

Some of the most important factors that influence learning are those that relate to the physical condition of the school building.[4] A 1997 review[5] of all the research conducted on the environmental condition of school buildings concluded that the condition of the building does contribute to a variance in student performance. As a group, these research studies strongly indicated that test scores of students in above-standard condition school buildings are higher than scores of students in sub-standard buildings.

Spending funds to improve and up grade the built environment of school buildings can be just as important as spending funds on class size, textbooks, and curriculum. In short, improving the physical condition of the school building is one sure and direct way of improving student achievement.

To obtain additional information on schools and school districts that have expanded the traditional use of their facilities, please visit the following websites:

U.S. Department of Education
http://www.ed.gov/21stcclc/

U.S. General Services Administration
http://www.afterschool.gov/

National Community Education Association
http://www.ncea.com/home.html

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[4] *Does it Matter Where Our Children Learn?* Daniel L. Duke, White paper commissioned by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, February 18, 1998

[5] "The Impact of School Buildings on Student Achievement and Behavior", *Journal of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development*, Programme on Educational Building, February 1997

National Center for Community Education
http://www.nccenet.org/

Keeping Schools Open as Community Learning Centers
http://www.ed.gov/pubs/LearnCenters/

Making the Grade: State and Local Partnerships to Establish School-Based Health Centers
http://www.gwu.edu/~mtg/sbhc/

The National Child Care Information Center
http://www.nccic.org/

Combined School and Public Libraries: Guidelines for Decision-Making
http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlcl/pld/comblibs.html

Use of School Facilities by Religious Organizations
http://www.adl.org/religion_ps/facilities.html

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 21st. Century Schools
http://www.mott.org/special_report/sr_main.htm

Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory, 21st. Century Learning Centers Program
http://www.mcrel.org/programs/21stcentury/index.asp

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, School and Community
http://www.ncrel.org/info/community/

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time
http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC/index.html

NOTES

J. L. Epstein, et al. *Ten Steps to School-Family-Community Partnerships, School, Family, and Community Partnerships.* Corwin Press 1997.

When to Begin. National PTA, 330 North Wabash Ave. Chicago. Suite 2100, Chicago, Ill 60611, National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs

What is a Community School? Coalition for Community Schools, c/o Institute for Educational Leadership, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 310 Washington, DC 20036

Shirley Hansen, *Schoolhouse in the Red.* American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209